



Utilising a virtual world to teach performance appraisal

An exploratory study

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to give a critical assessment of a study designed to investigate the potential of a new method for teaching HRD students about performance appraisal. It is argued that this approach is in the vanguard of developments in IT and learning.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper takes the form of an explorative study which is undertaken in the context of a virtual world setting.

Findings – There is potential value added for HRD teaching and learning using virtual world technology. Subjects identified strengths and weaknesses in their use of Second Life® for performance appraisal skills training. Importantly, there was some evidence that subjects emotionally identified with their online characters, with potential implications for the impact of training. Necessary adjustments to research methods are identified.

Research limitations/implications – This was a small scale study. Initial enquiry will inform larger scale research.

Practical implications – The model gives HRD students scope to practice different roles in performance appraisal and, in the longer term, to experiment with “ways of being”. Subjects could be mentored during their engagement in the appraisal process, enabling active tutoring for skill development. Also, a variety of teaching strategies could be employed such as exploring cultural aspects and engaging students in peer-to-peer teaching.

Originality/value – The paper presents an innovative method, blending IT with a more conventional training concept, role-play.

Keywords Performance appraisal, Feedback, Role play, Human resource development, Teaching

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The last ten years have seen considerable advances and penetration of IT applications in teaching, training and development. Clearly, people charged with the teaching and training of human resource development (HRD) need to investigate and experiment with this “new” medium. In a number of recent reports, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has referred to the evolution in eLearning (CIPD, 2003, 2005, 2008), and the projected rise in the use of eLearning within the corporate world (CIPD Research Insight, 2008). In higher education most universities now operate some sort of virtual learning environment and have plans to extend and develop its use. We remain, though, somewhat impoverished in terms of robust research data evaluating utility and impact. There is also a need for caution about

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responding too positively to the “new” technology at the expense of fundamental good learning practice before this evidence is generated and evaluated. This article seeks to contribute to the search for evidence.

In a paper for the annual University Forum for Human Resource Development (UFHRD) conference held in Lille, France in 2008, the author posed the following questions:

Can initial performance appraisal training be taught in an online context?

Can performance appraisal be carried out adequately in a virtual world[1] context? (Morse, 2008).

To address these questions, clarify and develop teaching practice in this area, the author engaged in a small “proof of concept” research project - the Virtual Appraisal Research Project (VARP) – with colleagues at the University of Edinburgh[2].

The overarching study hypothesis was that HRD students could learn from experimenting with “ways of being” in a virtual world environment. Might such an experience open up perspectives on Performance Appraisal (PA) not usually possible in the same way in real life? For example, when working in Second Life©[3], might the potential of “being” of a different gender, race, age, disability and working with others of a different gender, race, age, disability generate valuable learning – including finding how responses change based on perceptions of such attributes and characteristics? Such experiences might have the capacity to profoundly affect understanding and practice in work settings and for human resource development more generally.

Whilst such questions provide the longer term drivers for research into the impact of learning in a virtual context our shorter term interests with the pilot VARP study are best captured by the question “does the experience of PA training online offer something fresh to this practice area within a higher education HR programme and qualification”?

The pilot involved ten student research subjects from the University of Edinburgh’s MSc in Management of Training and Development (an international course). Initially the subjects completed a standard University of Edinburgh form, “Student uses of information technology survey”. This form detailed basic age/gender information, and some indication of her/his computing and online experience. The subjects were then offered basic training in working in Second Life; they then engaged in a series of role-play exercises based on PA scenarios; this was followed by focus group interviews and debriefing.

The article unfolds as follows. Initially, the context of the study is discussed. Subsequently, the paper outlines the research process followed and the findings generated. The article concludes with a critical assessment of the implications of the findings for aspects of teaching and learning in HRD and further research.

Context

The literature on PA is extensive though rarely complimentary about practice in either education or business settings. Despite heavy investment costs in time and money, and some degree of investment in training, there continue to be real concerns about effectiveness and impact. Seeking best practice for training and development strategies has seemed to be elusive and therefore an innovative approach utilising technology seemed worth exploring.

Cross *et al.* (2007) initially suggest that:

Humans evolved to pick berries and hunt woolly mammoths, not to strain reality through text, words, concepts and computers (p. 4).

However, the authors go on to talk about the evolution of approaches to engagement and learning in the industrial age – children kept within school buildings while learning and sending workers to training events away from their place of work. They argued that the strategy of putting “walls around schools and training departments” (Cross *et al.*, 2007) meant that those children and workers had been placed in an artificial learning environment. A more current perspective has been to learn effectively from real life – children learning in the community and employees learning in their workplace (Cross *et al.*, 2007). The research concept to be tested was that, while it might involve using an artificial learning environment, practicing for PA in the “virtual world” environment might enable practitioners to transcend some existing practice boundaries and aid an innovative approach to what is seen as a troublesome challenge. Further, the project might generate data to help establish whether this strategy had potential for operational practice application or clarify if the method was just “more of the same” only re-packaged in a “post-modern form”.

HRD context

Assessment of work practice is vital for business development and is critical for organisational credibility and survival. It is also likely to have a real impact on the lives of individuals, both positive and negative. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) is Europe’s largest HR development professional body and the United Kingdom’s leading professional body for those involved in the management and development of staff (CIPD, n.d., official web site). For professionally accredited courses, such as the one described in this study, it is a curriculum requirement to address assessment – both from knowledge and skill dimensions

Over a decade ago, it was argued that PA’s were developed when organisations were more hierarchically organised and stable and where “long-term employment was the norm”. The current business environment has changed in diverse ways since then, including radical developments in technology, career structuring, matrix management and globalisation.

CIPD considered the “opportunity and the challenge” when considering the implications of managing people in relation to the evolution of technological developments (CIPD Report, 2005) and the variety of ways in which these developments can contribute to better practice. In a climate of growth in PA and performance monitoring (Stanton, 2000) it would seem prudent to explore which type of PA development has greatest utility. This might be especially crucial in relation to motivation for learning (CIPD Report, 2003), especially for the “game-playing generation”.

Martin *et al.* (CIPD Research Insight, 2008) refer to the perceptions of the “Generation Y, Virtual or Net-generations, born after 1982” (CIPD Research Insight, 2008, p. 4) – reflecting on how they engage with online resources in terms of communication, learning, purchasing and playing. The research concept reflected the need to address both the expansion of the virtual learning environment, and changes in generational attitudes towards desirable methods of learning. Arguably, there is a need to acknowledge a growing preference for the use of online engagement and to plan development based on the evolving skill base of future students and employees. This could be especially relevant for difficult development areas, such as PA.

Tensions

PA has been a controversial subject in business and education environments, often with considerable time and attention required to address the problems experienced by

both appraisers and appraisees (Fletcher, 2004, 2008; Armstrong and Baron, 2005; Mullins, 2005, 2007; Bratton and Gold, 2003, 2007; Torrington *et al.*, 2002; Rees and Porter, 2004; Lucas *et al.*, 2006; Bartlett *et al.*, 2008). It is also very expensive for organisations (Sadler-Smith, 2006; Grubb, 2007).

Numerous professionals – psychologists, management scholars, and human resource theorists – have debated the practices and processes involved in appraisal and appraisal training. An early study by Meyer *et al.* in, 1965 offered an uncomfortable finding, commenting that “Criticism has a negative effect on achievement of goals” and “Praise has little effect one way or the other” (Meyer *et al.*, 1965, p. 124). Other more recent critiques have been equally uncompromising, suggesting that many elements of PA are so flawed they are not fit for their purpose (Tournish, 2006; Grubb, 2007).

Despite the many difficulties in the operational reality of PA there is no strong indication that operational practice will radically change (from individual to group, for example). Therefore, incremental changes that develop practice arguably should be encouraged, and the identified criticisms addressed where possible.

The PA areas critiqued include aspects such as the use of power – for example, pay and reward used for motivation and control. Also, normal operational practice appears to focus on the individual, rarely on the process or context – indeed the reasons for poor performance in a “training gap” context may be difficult to establish and may be linked to resources, structure, or motivation as opposed to individual skill or ability (Truelove, 2006, p. 4). Other authors comment on the lack of skills of the appraisers (tendency to leniency/stringency, halo/horns, central tendency, lack of transparency, equity (Feldman, 1981; Murphy and Margulies, 2004; Tournish, 2006; Muller-Camen *et al.*, 2008; York, 2010); concerns about the effectiveness of training (Woehr and Huffcutt, 1994); and the innate resistance people have towards being negatively criticised (Feldman, 1981; Tournish, 2006). Further, PA is seen as a source of stress (Tomaka *et al.*, 1993).

In hope of eradicating or minimising these issues, appraisal training has long been recognised and encouraged (Zedeck and Cascio, 1982; Stewart, 1994; Fletcher, 2008), though the literature has not consistently reflected agreement on the effectiveness or consistency of training.

While some of the organisational appraisal problems noted need to be addressed structurally and contextually, engaging in role-play has emerged from the literature as a significant element for developing effective performance in appraisal (Carlton and Sloman, 1992; Stewart, 1994; Blatner, 2002). Over the last decade the evolution of 3-D virtual worlds has created unusual opportunities for taking role-play to a different level in gaming.

Role-play

Role-play’s origins derive from ancient times (Van Ments, 1989) and were connected with the “rolled up” script for plays. More recently it has been defined as:

Role-playing is the enactment of roles in a structured context. This method is very useful for practising interpersonal skills (Henderson, 2008, p. 100).

The uses of role playing were classified by Van Ments (1978, in Cohen *et al.*, 2007 pp. 452-453) and are here adapted as:

Developing sensitivity and awareness – this involves exploring stereotypes, developing a deeper understanding of the point of view and feelings of someone who finds him/herself in a particular role.

Experiencing the pressures that create roles – exploring the interaction of formal structure and individual personalities in role taking.

Testing out for oneself possible modes of behaviour – this involves the rehearsal of new situations in advance of having to undertake them in reality.

Simulating a situation for others (and possibly oneself to learn from) – providing material for others to observe and learn from. Note: This may also include “feedback of the effect of one’s behaviour/actions/tone of voice/approach on others” (Debenham, 1994, p. 543)

Use of role-play is extensive in both corporate and educational settings. Sometimes it is used to address issues of attitude formation and change (Reid *et al.*, 2002, p. 74) though as a development method it has had a mixed press. Writers comment that often participants do not regard role-play as real (Fletcher, 2008; Stewart, 1994). Others dispute the scientific validity of outcomes that emerge, such as subjects only reflecting what they would do, with the further point made that role-play activities lack true spontaneity (Ginsburg, 1978 in Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p. 449). However, these views can be contrasted with evidence from some of the more powerful examples of role-play such as the impact shown in the Stanley Milgram experiments (Ginsburg, 1978 in Cohen *et al.*, 2007) and by the Stanford Prison experiment (Ginsburg, 1978 in Cohen *et al.*, 2007) where people apparently related to their roles in an extreme way – though this interpretation of the latter example is critiqued by Yardley- Matwiejczuk (1999).

While the quality of the role-play experience cannot be guaranteed, there are many strategies that human resource developers and teachers/lecturers utilise to minimise problems and maximise development. For example, it is important to keep the scenario and roles as realistic as possible; to involve the group in planning; to debrief; and, to ensure confidentiality (Fletcher, 2008; Stewart, 1994; Cohen *et al.*, 2007). Another criticism of role-play has suggested that “the verbal reports in role-playing are very susceptible to artefactual (sic) influence such as social desirability” (Ginsburg, 1978 in Cohen *et al.*, 2007 p. 449). If participants are sensitive to audience perceptions of their performance, this might influence how they act in role. To reduce embarrassment in “performing” a camera could be used. This embarrassment might be further reduced if the exercise were experienced online in the medium of a computer-simulated world utilising an avatar[4].

In context of the current study, Bell (2001, p63) noted that role-play could assist skill and attitude development. Stewart (1994) goes further, asserting that role-play is particularly useful “where attitude change is important . . . unfreezing people by trying on a completely new appraisal personality” (Stewart, 1994, pp. 209-210). These aspects encapsulate our longer-term view. Past research evidence on face-to-face role-play, and current evidence from experience in the virtual world, suggests that emotional engagement in roles can be targeted to develop learning and understanding (Molka-Danielson and Deutchmann, 2009; Meadows, 2008).

Role-play in a virtual setting

Until recently the focus of PA training has tended to be on information giving (knowledge) and face-to-face role-play (skill development and experience). This has been identified as problematic as noted above. To expand this repertoire it may be possible to investigate from a different perspective. An interesting example is provided by the experience of a small study of high school students exploring “possible selves” in an online role-play environment and what they were learning about “identity, culture, stereotypes and prejudice in the first-hand experiential context of a virtual

world” (Lee and Hoadley, 2007). In this study students could choose avatars to be of a different gender in role and were interested to discover that “boys who played as girls observed more incidences of courtesy, flirting, and in some cases, sexism” (Lee and Hoadley, 2007). The authors also noted incidences of discrimination based on appearance. These experiences opened up the classroom discussion, leading the researchers to propose that:

[...] this identity adoption process trains students to solve problems from the point of view of the roles they are assuming, opening them up to new perspectives and challenging them to think in new ways (Lee and Hoadley, 2007, p. 4).

This is consistent with research from gaming and virtual world studies such as Turkle (2005) who investigated identity construction online. She wrote in terms of involvement with computers not as a “tool” but as part of our social and psychological lives. Both Meadows (2008) and Taylor (2006) argue that, once created, the avatar can influence identity and relationships “in the ways it serves as the key artefact through which users not only know others and the world around them, but themselves” (Taylor, 2006, p. 96). Avatars appear to evolve with use.

Gee (2003) has a powerful and much quoted model of the three elements of identity that participants are grappling with online – a virtual identity, a real world identity, and a projective identity (Gee, 2003, pp. 54-56). In the immersive virtual environment we seem to project into the avatars, blurring the lines between these identities, both being and becoming. This “blurring” effect is illustrated by Meadows (2008) who makes strong claims about the impact of the virtual community – going beyond the individual to comment on the social reaction from the “real world”. He gives examples of how the “real world” is using and reacting to the Second Life virtual world – noting the campaigning use international politicians make of the virtual world (such as Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton, Jean Marie le Pen, Nicolas Sarkozy (Meadows, 2008, pp. 69-70) and in a UK context, David Milliband, a former UK government minister (CIPD Research Insight, 2008)); the fact that virtual banking licences have been created to enable banking services in the online environment; and, that the Chinese government has been working with a virtual world organisation (Entropia Universe) to create a cash-based virtual economy in the Second Life “world” for China (Meadows, 2008, pp. 69-70). He makes the further point that from all over the world at least 100 Universities (examples include Harvard, Stanford, Edinburgh) have bought Second Life islands, and educators such as Noam Chomsky and Richard Dawkins have made guest appearances in Second Life. An expanding number of students at these Universities has been and will be exposed to this or similar arenas for their education (Meadows, 2008, p. 70).

The above theorists illustrate that both on a societal and individual level we are engaging with the virtual world in close to real world ways. Online participants seem to experience emotional identification with their avatars and the mix of identities offers a new way to experience aspects of the world. Lee and Hoadley’s (2007) analysis in their study encouraged the author to form a hypothesis – that developing PA awareness and skill through virtual world training experience might yield more than face to face role-play. Virtual world training could incorporate elements of conventional performance appraisal, but allow the experimental self to engage in a wide range of roles, including, though not limited to, appraiser and appraisee – generating an opportunity to be very different from the normal physical representation of self, by modifying gender, race, age, or ability/disability. What might be the impact of identity

play – could it increase reflection, empathy, and skills applied and might it benefit motivation and engagement?

Currently, alternative views on PA have focused more on process – such as total quality management (Lam and Schaubroek, 1999), multi-source or team assessments – but the more conventional “person to person” model of PA still predominates. Essentially, this study sought to refresh the approach to role-play, in order to target and facilitate “self-awareness” as Fletcher and Bailey suggest that this enhances performance (Fletcher and Bailey, 2003, p. 395).

Utility

Computer assisted contributions to appraisal training have a reasonably lengthy history (Davis and Mount, 1984). Evolution to even more effective and context-related models arguably should be in the interests of both the individual and the organisation. The interests of students could also be served in exploring peer to peer engagement, establishing how it feels to be in both roles prior to having a work-based responsibility, thus enabling them to be personally responsible but also free to experiment in ways not possible when in purely “physical reality” training or with later constraints in permanent employment.

The objective of the research study was to devise initial performance appraisal training to bring students/employees into the role of appraiser/appraisee in a safe, interesting and motivating way. This training could ultimately be shared at different levels in an educational or organisational context and could be accessed online, enabling fitting into schedules that would be difficult for more formal group training. The method might also reduce the need for shared group venues/equipment requirements. It was considered that it might be possible to create a virtual community frame of reference.

Virtual environments/communities

A number of studies have been referenced which variously “claim that online environments can form virtual communities” and alternatively, to describe an online environment as a “pseudocommunity”. While the exploration of virtual communities is still in its infancy, one study was more positive in relation to people management in organisations. The study referred to the work in virtual communities as being productive by enhancing sharing – leading to knowledge transfer and exchange – thus generating more effective HR practices (CIPD Report, 2005, pp. 31-33). This CIPD sponsored report also refers to social software having impact on the organisational culture (CIPD Report, 2005). A more fully developed PA teaching model, evolved from the one proposed in this study, could be situated in the virtual community/social software of an organisation or education establishment.

Research model

The objective of the pilot research study was to explore initial appraisal training in a virtual world environment (Second Life®), to determine requirements for the process, both technical and social, and to establish basic information on which to base a more detailed study. It is acknowledged that there are many elements to the process and it was agreed that the research would have to be staged and evaluated as it progressed. The activity was student centred and endeavoured to link theory and practice in PA in an engaging and fresh way. There was also a desire to learn more about teaching in the virtual world.

Methodology

For the first stage, the researchers planned a qualitative study based on social learning theory and the application stage in Bloom's Taxonomy. A limited case study methodology was chosen to explore the experience of a research group in a novel environment for PA training.

The researchers decided to limit experimentation with wider ideas concerning identity at this point to reduce the number of variables. The plan was to focus on technical issues and limited social engagement testing. For example, agreeing to keep a conventional appearance for people and an office setting within the virtual world.

Engagement time was restricted in the exercise to what might be available in an organisation. The sole criterion for subject selection into the group was based on whether the subjects had more than one year of employment in a full-time job – effectively, whether subjects had some experience of being appraised or appraising.

It was agreed that the process should be anonymous when in role in Second Life, therefore communication in the virtual world was by typing text on-screen. It was anticipated that engagement might be less sophisticated with text communication. However, we wanted the students to work “as strangers” in this process to limit reaction to others as a “classmate/friend”. In a larger exercise, voice communication would be preferred. Even with voice communication, there would be limits given such a brief training event. Finally, students were asked not to discuss their avatar until after the exercise was completed. The majority complied with this request, though some found it easy to guess the identity of their appraiser/appraisee.

Process

The ten subjects were provided with a handbook about Second Life (giving an introduction, URLs, screen shots, technical instructions for the creation of an avatar, navigation and supporting online communication in Second Life) and received training before taking part in role-play online (approximately three sessions each).

Subjects worked on role-play scenarios in two computer laboratories supported by the VARP team members, with appraisers in one group and appraisees in another. Each undertook both the appraiser and appraisee roles over time, with three scenarios focused on praise, criticism and counselling. They were given character information about the role and the context of the appraisal; for example, the focus area for the appraisal and a brief suggestion about the “personal” situation and attitude they should represent. The first scenario outline was distributed immediately prior to the exercise, but the subsequent ones were shared the day before the exercise to allow more time for the subjects to “get into role”. The subjects worked online – able to view “themselves” as lifelike, mobile representations of self, engaging in dialogue in an office setting. They “walked” into an office setting, sat down, and started to type dialogue in order to converse with the appraiser or appraisee.

After each session, the subjects completed a feedback sheet, detailing their experiences. On completion of all the scenarios a focus group was arranged, and a group interview the following week, involving all participants and the VARP team (both events videoed). Finally, the researchers gave the subjects feedback on the rationale for the study and comment on initial findings.

Findings

The objectives of the study were to enhance student understanding and experience in PA by involving them in a virtual world context for experiential learning. The themes for the collected data included the level of subject engagement in the process, aspects of learning, and practical observations for research development: the findings are grouped under learning issues, design issues and delivery issues.

Learning issues

The subjects enjoyed learning about the virtual environment. They may also have liked being a “special” group within the class. They had been approached based on their employment history. However, there was some evidence from their informal conversation and the focus group interview that they felt specially chosen, perhaps for other qualities. The research team debated the implication of this perception, in terms of potential “artefactual impact”. That is, the way in which they responded in the study influenced by this feeling of being specially chosen?

Identification with avatars seemed limited – the avatars for the exercise were given to the participants. As noted above they did not use the ones they had created in training. Whilst there was initial subject denial about strong identification with avatars, there were contradictory statements made about being embarrassed when the avatar did something (was impolite by sitting at the appraiser’s desk rather than the seat for the appraisee) or was wearing something that made the “driver” of the avatar uncomfortable or seemed inconsistent with what they were trying to achieve (an example was noting unhappiness about the avatar wearing “inappropriate” footwear for someone going to an important interview). These emotive reactions sustain the hypothesis that with greater participant input to the avatar construction that the identification might have been much more pronounced.

Some of the subjects were from large public sector organisations – they suggested that they could see utility for large-scale use/eLearning/dispersed training in their settings. This may also apply to global organisations more generally. We had anticipated this view from the outset. Part of the logic of exploring this would be to enable people in different geographical locations to engage in this type of training – including multi-nationals.

The notion of levels of participation needs to be explored more thoroughly – some student participants were more skilled than others even at the outset of training. In the initial information sweep, there was an assessment of experience in the online environment, but there was no deliberate matching of pairs on this basis. The priority remained to give experience of the two roles, and to work with a variety of subjects. However, in classes or organisations, different levels of skill and experience could be utilised by strategic matching of participants. This could be based on people with “equal” levels of experience/skill or perhaps linked on a mentoring basis. Therefore, some assessment of entry-level skill base would be necessary.

The researchers offered participants some mentoring during scenarios – this enabled subjects to be both in role and in person, able to discuss potential courses of action. This was done informally. An emerging aim of the exercise was the capacity to tutor while people were engaged in the exercise.

From a tutor perspective, the student learning was varied. Examples of responses and comments included students talking of their worries about how an appraisee might respond, perhaps getting angry in supervision. This enabled discussion about how to deal with such situations, and gave scope for group discussion later. One noted

that “venting out is good, feels better even though it is virtual”. Another suggested that some form of “emoticons”[5] would help convey more emotion in formal situations. Students also observed that they had to “work quite hard” as the task was intellectually engaging. Some described the role-play as more of an experience than a lesson. One student noted that it had made him “think about handling development-related employee turnover”. Another commented on being able to better understand skills in developing questions for appraisal. The subjects also prompted the researchers to distribute the scenario material in advance to enable them to generate a more thought-through role creation - for example one student felt with pre-knowledge he could empathise with his own avatar dealing with a difficult situation, noting that this helped the experience feel more real. Taking the appraiser role was entirely new for some students, and they learned how difficult it could be.

They also noted that negative attitudes could be formed if the avatar was handled badly or the communication was slow or stilted, and if there was a disparity in skill in terms of technical ease. There were also areas where discussion points, conveyed in text, seemed more open to misinterpretation.

However, there were also comments about learning in this way being fun. Engagement in the role-play apparently drove greater reading on the subject area (perhaps as a protective measure, not to be left behind in case the other students were better prepared) and, as noted below, students used the learning from this exercise in choice of course assignment question and preparation. Also, involvement in the project apparently influenced choice of dissertation topic.

Design issues

The researchers noted the following three areas where the research design should be modified or considered in a different way.

First, how to establish and devise the minimum training requirements for the group in Second Life? The students were trained just for the purpose in hand and the project team offered minimal teaching to operate when in role, trying to emulate the kind of time frame that might be possible in business or in education. This meant ignoring the preferred solution of time spent engaging in “social chat online” to increase familiarity of text communication before being involved in the exercise. Longer practice might have contributed to more comfort for subjects and increased technical skills from an early point. In research terms we agreed that this should be addressed differently in future, as the longer “time cost” spent on socialising skills could be offset by the utility of better skills later applied to other types of training in Second Life, such as interviewing for recruitment, discipline, counselling.

Second, the subjects questioned the quality of engagement possible when there were so many factors to consider simultaneously during the exercise, citing examples such as students working in a second language, trying to type responses quickly, and trying to think in character. Some of these difficulties might have been alleviated by the expansion of the “social chat” opportunity, noted above, to address some of the confidence and capacity issues.

Third, the collective view of the subjects was that a major improvement would have been voice rather than text exchanges. They felt that their “competence” in the exercise had been inhibited and that it would have been better to ignore the anonymity issue and let them use more “skill” in the scenarios. While the use of voice communication may be used in future stages, the researchers are still trying to assess how to address the loss of anonymity.

Delivery issues

There were a variety of technical development issues during the process – such as creating avatars for the scenarios. While the subjects created their own avatar during training, they were provided with character avatars for the role-play scenarios to maintain anonymity. This is an area of practice that will be addressed differently, the research hypothesis being that the emotional connection with creating your own avatar was broken by our “pragmatic” arrangement of giving people an avatar different from the one they had personally created in training. In future, participants will be asked to create avatars linked to the roles they will be playing.

There was the technical difficulty of moving five pairs of avatars to five “offices” simultaneously. In addition, the brief scenarios needed to be recorded for later observation. These challenges were addressed in a novel way by our technical researchers. The avatar pairs entered the online University “property” in Second Life, sat on a bench and were transported directly to the foyer next to the office they would enter for the PA interview. A camera in the interview office enabled a non-invasive view of the appraisal discussion and allowed the scenario to be recorded for later process of evaluation by the research team.

Lack of non-verbal activity – facial expression and limited body language was found to be inhibiting. Future work by our technical adviser should enable some additional measures of facial expression (frown) and some additional gestures to indicate body language (such as folding arms).

Discussion

Some reflections are offered on the study – considering limitations, originality, course teaching and learning, and future considerations.

Limitations of the pilot study

It was agreed that the selection of student subjects on the chosen criterion had been problematic. At least two students had significant language difficulties affecting the response/dialogue in the online role-play and language proficiency did impact on the depth of dialogue. On a broader frame of reference, there were limitations in the nature of the communication possible in a text-based activity. Using text created the need for students to multi-task mentally – meaning language translation for non-native speakers while dealing with technical and cultural aspects of the scenarios.

A few of the students had health or other difficulties and missed occasional sessions, underlining the vulnerability of small-scale research.

The students gave limited written feedback in the feedback sheets (though were much more voluble and engaged in the focus group and group interview). Students were operating in the first semester of their post-graduate course and therefore already under some pressure. This may have influenced their responses, particularly in terms of completing written evaluation forms at the end of scenario sessions.

Originality

There has been no indication in the literature studied thus far that this type of training is being developed elsewhere, therefore the researchers argue that this is an innovative way to develop PA training.

The evidence from the study suggested that the online experience was an enhanced form of role-play. Although the evidence was limited, there was a modest degree of

emotional response to the avatar, and subjects did become engrossed in the role. They were also able to focus on the activity intensely in order to overcome the lack of non-verbal clues. The need to type in dialogue significantly affected spontaneity – though this time gap did enable consultation/mentoring during the process, allowing subjects to reflect on responses and create strategies to deal with the issues raised by their appraiser/appraisee. This “space” to consult *in situ* improves on breaking off and resuming in real time scenarios, as the subject can be both real and virtual during the activity and their interview partner would not hear the dialogue with the mentor.

Also, prejudice and assumptions (York, 2010) about gender might be more tentative as subjects would not know the true gender of the other subject. A male avatar might be operated by a woman or vice versa.

Use in course teaching?

The pilot study linked directly to coursework for two courses in the MSc in the Management of Training and Development. The teaching objectives of the study were to enhance student understanding in three areas – exposure to an aspect of eLearning, exploration of PA issues, and to develop some practice experience in PA. Ideally, it was hoped to progress teaching in terms of theory/concept knowledge, knowledge exchange, communication skills, empathy, sensitivity, evaluation, and skills in application. It was also intended to move the experiment forward in stages that would be helpful to individual students while developing the research concept. The researchers were satisfied that most of these broad objectives were met in that the dialogue with/observation of the subjects indicated an evolution of technical skill; there was evidence of developing appreciation of the theory/concept base for PA; and the degree of practice experience was particularly significant for those with no previous experience as an appraiser, while others were asked to think again about the responsibilities of being an appraisee.

The research objectives were to enhance understanding of using a virtual world for teaching in this area and to begin to test the original hypothesis about the utility of role-play in the virtual environment, taking participants into new territory beyond normal role-play experience. Consequently, some assessment was made of the strategy and resources needed to run this type of training exercise, including a review of aspects that might be transferable into education and employment situations - for example, the scope to use peer-to-peer experience before being promoted to supervisory role and appraising staff.

The impact on class teaching could also be wider than an exercise on appraisal alone. The teaching plan could involve students in debates about methods of learning, why it might suit some more than others, and aid in engagement with multi – level ethics debates about reality and authenticity (Cohen *et al.*, 2007).

Another key element to be further explored is the cultural aspect – it is acknowledged by Fletcher that much of the literature on PA is “from the developed countries of the West” (Fletcher, 2008, p. 172) and that there is disparity of reaction/behaviour even between the USA and UK (Early and Stubblebine, 1989, in Fletcher, 2008), as a result countries with even more distinct cultural differences may find that the extant literature is unhelpful or misleading. Therefore, exploring the growing literature from other cultures could be a joint exercise with the class.

Overall, the research and teaching strategy has aimed for development of “graduated success” for participants, as expressed by Debenham (1994) whereby “they succeed as often as possible, but each time, have to work for this success” (Debenham, 1994 in Prior, 1994, p. 544).

Future considerations

It would be feasible to re-run and re-use material from this research method in a way that might reduce frustration for participants having to repeat the exercise in real life. Role reversal, role rotation and re-taking a scenario would allow people to try alternative approaches. It is also possible to anticipate future development – the training could eventually be run with a “bot”[6] responding. Also, the online scenario exercises can be recorded, therefore the students could have an opportunity to view and discuss dialogue content at a later point. This later use of observing scenario material could be helpful to enable self-reflection, discussion with a tutor, and to re-emphasise learning. Potentially this material could be used with other classes, assuming appropriate permissions have been granted.

The research strategy could be expanded, using the framework as a peer-to-peer exercise on assessment, and utilisation of formative assignment material as the subject matter. While there are no plans to use this type of engagement for more formal assessment at present, as work on this project has not reached an appropriate stage, this may emerge later. However, it would be important that adequate standards of support and training are employed before virtual role-play becomes part of any assessment practice. It is noteworthy that the stage one research participants chose to use their experience in their assessed course work. Also, some found this subject matter deeply interesting and worked on PA topics for their dissertations.

In considering the use of the research study for formal course material, there are some concerns. The volume of material generated might be significant – perhaps a burden to analyse and assess. Additional hours for teachers and students might be significant in an already compressed timetable. However, the diversity and novelty and potential effectiveness of training method (and for the researchers, the positive evaluation of utility from the initial group of students) might outweigh many of these concerns.

We also need to remain aware of what Martin described as the “dark” side of technology (CIPD Report, 2005, pp. 35-39) where people can be alienated by the technology and there is a potential for remoteness in this type of training. The researchers envisage that HRD lecturers and specialists need to ensure a degree of continuing personal communication in the shape of mentors/tutors, peers and line managers as people learn about performance appraisal.

With these cautionary comments in mind, the favoured strategy for developing the study is to repeat the small group experience, albeit modified. It is further intended that the research group participants will be actively involved in class teaching on performance appraisal and eLearning during small group work in lectures. It may also be possible to gain subject agreement for the wider class group to access some of the teaching material generated in the scenarios for class debate.

There is also a potential link between students on different courses, and to staff from external organisations – some of the organisations that currently offer Work-based learning placements to students on the MSc in the Management of Training and Development have expressed interest in their staff participating in this study, potentially extending the contact and shared study between students and practitioners. This would have a significant learning potential for students, employees and researchers.

Conclusion

Arguably the strategy outlined gives HRD experiential teaching an effective blend of IT with the best of a more traditional method. Prior to the exercise students read about PA, perhaps in some competition with their peers. While role-playing in the scenarios, students appeared physically and emotionally engaged in the task, tutors could coach their practice and learning points could be debated later. Subsequently, the group were interested enough to choose PA linked questions for their assignments and Dissertation topics. This suggests a good level of engagement.

From evidence of the scope to expand student PA experience in a constructive way, this small study offers an innovative approach to teaching one important aspect of HRD practice. It also underlines the huge potential in development of online teaching for wider areas of HRD teaching, such as more general management skills or team exercises such as learning to chair a team meeting online. The opportunity for “practicing practice” should be seized and evolved, with the joint objectives of improving practice and potentially saving costs.

In light of the evolution from traditional approaches, to IT developments such as platforms in Web 1.0 (ICT), Web 2.0 (user inputs), Enterprise 2.0 (CIPD Research Insight, 2008), and now issues on the horizon like Cloud computing (large data farms), Smart Objects, and the Personal Web (Horizon Report, 2009), it is vital to address the changing face of organisation and education web use for learning and development. HRD needs to deal proactively with the challenging evolution of work practice, taking a leadership role in creating development opportunities online, with acknowledgement that this should be part of a blend of activity to enhance learning.

Notes

1. Virtual world – is a computer-based simulated environment intended for its users to inhabit and interact via avatars, which are usually depicted as textual, three-dimensional graphical representations. The computer accesses a computer-simulated world and presents perceptual stimuli to the user, who in turn can manipulate elements of the modelled world. Communication between users has ranged from text, graphical icons, visual gesture, sound, and, rarely, forms using touch and balance senses. (adapted from CIPD Research Insight, 2008).
2. VARP researchers included Shona Morse, Dr Hamish Macleod, Fiona Littleton and Dr Rory Ewins (all members of staff at the University of Edinburgh).
3. Second Life is an internet-based 3-D virtual world created by its residents. In the online world, residents can explore, socialise and communicate as well as create and trade items in a virtual market place using a virtual unit of currency, the Linden Dollar (CIPD Research Insight, 2008).
4. Avatars – “graphical personifications that represent the learner’s identity, presence, location and interaction within the VLE” (Annetta *et al.*, 2008) (see note 1).
5. An emoticon is a textual expression representing the face of a writer’s mood or facial expression. Emoticons are often used to alert a responder to the tenor or temper of a statement, and can change and improve interpretation of plain text (Wikipedia, available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emoticon> (accessed 28 June, 2010)).
6. Used in the sense of “computer game bot,” computer controlled player or opponent (Wikipedia). Effectively, an avatar controlled by programming rather than an individual, available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bot> (accessed 8 July 2010).

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